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ABSTRACT

Advantage should be taken of the increased interest in teaching Old English literature, in translation, at the college and high school levels. The study of "Beowulf" and other Old English literature has proved to be a stimulating experience for students at the United States Air Force Academy and at Georgia College. At the academy, the study of "Beowulf" and Old English literature culminated in a research paper in one freshman course and was a valuable part of several other courses--literature survey, classics, and values in western world literature. At Georgia College, focus on "Beowulf" has been included in a course on the history of the English language and will be used in a series of adult education seminars which involve faculty from other departments. Students at both schools have responded enthusiastically to Old English literature. (Suggestions for translations, anthologies, and other materials, as well as ideas for teaching approaches, are included.) (JM)

The Teaching of Old English in Translation

Joseph F. Tuso

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Today many college and high school English teachers are going back to the basics to help their students attain needed writing and comprehension skills. A parallel development is an increasing interest in the teaching of Old English literature in translation at both the high school and college levels. I would like to tell you about my experiences in teaching Beowulf in translation at the U.S. Air Force Academy and at Georgia College. By sharing this information, I hope to give you some ideas on how you might use Beowulf and other Old English literature in some new teaching areas.

One advantage my colleagues and I had at the Academy was that course requirements were largely prescribed. Another was that our students were high achievers. For example, our cadets' composite average of about 560 on the English portions of the SAT pegged them some 125 points above the average 435 scored by about one million American high school seniors who graduated in 1975. In short, we had a captive student body, and our students had a higher aptitude for writing and for understanding literathan their respective year-groups at most other colleges or universities. Although these things will have to be kept in mind when I tell you what we did with Beowulf at the Air Force Academy, I am convinced that an enthusiastic, flexible approach and careful selection of translations would make a study of

Beowulf worthwhile in both high school and college, and for a variety of students.[1]

In one Academy freshman course I used Beowulf as the subject of a twelve-lesson block culminating in a research paper of 1,500 to 2,000 words complete with notes and bibliography. I usually started by analyzing the opening of Genesis[2] and The Lord's Prayer,[3] two selections well enough known in Modern English and containing enough cognates to make them quite useful in giving the students a feeling for the language, its orthography, and perhaps more important, to dispel their fears early on. After twenty or thirty minutes of working through these selections--and by all means have each of your students read some of the Old English aloud--your knowledge and zest for the subject can make the language come to life. Your discussion of Old English prosody should be simple enough to give your students a good sense of the major features of alliterative verse,[4] and be sure to give your students a bibliography carefully geared to their educational level.[5] I found I had to set up a reserve shelf of my own private critical books until the Academy library stocked what was needed; I had the same problem at Georgia College until I ordered additional titles for our library.

When you use Beowulf or other Old English works in translation in a freshman course you'll enjoy it, because such an approach has a number of things going for it. First, freshmen are open to new

ideas, and they expect college to be demanding. Further, high school class identity is gone, hellionism lies dormant, and you can give your apprehensive young people a new unity of ideas and purpose. Freshmen are also inclined to think their professor knows what he or she is doing until we prove otherwise--they also tend to stereotype on little data, so whereas first day fogginess in class on your part is fatal, a good first day impression will set the tone for your entire course. And in this approach, Beowulf is not an end in itself--the student soon realizes he or she must know Beowulf well, or the paper will be a flop. Another advantage is that a number of your students will never have even heard of Beowulf before, so they can approach the poem with open minds. For example, in one class my students felt that each of the hero's three fights increases in interest and in threat to Beowulf. They simply don't agree with scholars who read the poem as being weak-centered, with the second battle less terrible than the first because Grendel's mother is a female. As one young man put it, even in football an away game is tougher than a home game--a spooky mere is not a hall. And there's something unnaturally frightening for the male who fights to the death with a female, and for us who read about it.

Not that many scholars haven't agreed on this view of the second fight, but the point is that I find my students discovering such things for themselves, and I suppose that is what we

call education. Were I to assign my freshmen a paper on legalization of marijuana, abortion, or capital punishment--you've had the experience--I fear the papers would read much alike; they would be no more free from prior opinion than an Arab sheikh at an OPEC conference. But point these young people at Beowulf, Maldon, Exodus, The Dream of the Rood, and other Old English literature in translation, and you rarely get a stock response. They are on the whole aware, perceptive readers if given half the chance, and respond to such works naturally.

What else will you discover when you use Beowulf with freshmen? First, the sheer necessity of making or finding suitable teaching aids impresses your students by showing that you care about them and about the course. Tailoring your material to your particular class puts the ball in your students' court--the next move is theirs. In my freshman course my tone is conversational, my instructions very clear, if not downright dictatorial. Tone, of course, must be adapted to the particular student audience, but clarity is still essential. Some educators have recently had much success with contract grading; your instructions to your students are a kind of contract. When you're clear about what you want and when you want it, there is usually little room for student misunderstanding.

Now these are simple things, but I apparently forgot some of them somewhere along the line. Another thing I had apparently

forgotten was to analyze my audience. I found I simply couldn't use a graduate approach when dealing with undergraduates. When I first began teaching Old English in translation, I taught so far over my students' heads that it was like delivering a pint of milk to someone's door in a freight train--both inefficient and overwhelming. I soon found that I could set reasonably high standards; I by no means had to teach "down" to my students, but I had always to remember that they were freshmen, not graduate students. Another thing I had to learn was not to let my enthusiasm for Beowulf take me along paths that diverted me from what I was really trying to do--to help my students with their writing.

As I've mentioned, there are many other Old English works you can use as subjects for student research reports besides Beowulf. And you can use them as subjects for papers, short essays, paragraphs, or sentences. Charles Kennedy's Anthology of Old English Poetry, still in print and still a bargain at $2.95, provides about 170 pages of solid, multi-genre translations.[6] I once got an interesting paper of about 1,000 words comparing and contrasting the Old English battle poems with the poetry of Rupert Brooke and General George Patton. The stimulus for the student's idea was his enjoyment of the movie Patton, and this enjoyment naturally transferred to his paper. You'll find that many Old English poems are relevant to your students' other interests. Capitalize on this; we must not confuse prostitution of values--"catering" to our

students' interests--with sound pedagogy. You can teach in a vacuum, but both you and your students will suffocate. You can bet that if there were an Old English work on great white sharks or giant gorillas I'd have my students read it; but have you ever read the Liber Monstrorum (Book of Monsters)? That will do the job. And how is the comitatus like and unlike the "family," Hrothgar like and unlike Don Corleone? The subjects of my students' papers have been limited only by my students' imagination and by my own ability to guide and approve their choice of topics.

How successful was this approach at the Air Force Academy? To begin with, the research papers were generally topnotch, even in the estimation of outside readers. I also found that the reasonable number of secondary works available on Beowulf, the Riddles, or other Old English works gave my students manageable limits within which to conduct their research.

At the Academy we were also able to expose fifty to seventy-five freshmen a year to Beowulf with, believe it or not, ensuingly increased interest in our humanities major. For example, four cadets who graduated in June 1976 were from among a group of thirty-six who studied Beowulf with me in their freshman year. These four were humanities majors. At a professionally-oriented school, one out of nine for the humanities is not a bad return for an investment made in the freshman year. I'm not so naive as to suppose that exposure to Beowulf can turn frogs into princes, but if a

potential for the humanities is hiding somewhere in a student's psyche, Beowulf is the kind of great work that can help bring it out. I wouldn't hesitate using Beowulf at any other technologically-oriented or junior college, based on my Academy experience.

At Air Force we also used Beowulf and the Kennedy Anthology in our English literature survey course--the large anthologies give Old English short shrift--and need bolstering with Kennedy or similar works. Beowulf in translation also worked especially well in our classics course, along with the Prose Edda, and had no trouble holding its own against the Odyssey, Aeneid, or Don Quixote. In fact, many of the students were especially taken with Germanic and Nordic myths, and couldn't understand why they hadn't read them in high school along with the Greek and Roman, especially since we as a nation spring largely from Anglo-Saxon roots. I leave it to high school English departments to answer that one.

Probably our most successful innovation in Teaching Beowulf in translation at the Air Force Academy was in our senior course, Values in Western World Literature. In this course we used Joseph Wood Krutch's The Modern Temper[7] as a reader for the range of values we examined in such works as Crime and Punishment, Candide, Shaw's St. Joan, and Faulkner's Reivers. I myself always began the course with discussion of Krutch's chapter "The Paradox of Humanism," followed immediately by five lessons on Beowulf and

three on John Gardner's novel, Grendel. These two works--one from the heroic age, one from the contemporary--support each other beautifully and set up a useful contrast between what I call the "God-man" and the "clod-man," the hero and the anti-hero. This dichotomy served well throughout the semester as we discussed other such antithetical concepts as honesty and deceit, hope and despair, or animalistix sex versus the sublimation of love--and Krutch has a provocative chapter on love, too. (You could use a similar approach with high school seniors, but I must rate Gardner's Grendel PG and suggest you not use it unless you have an enlightened school board.)

Once again the students' natural responses came into play as we analyzed theme, character, poetic devices, plot and sub-plot, and came up with a view of Anglo-Saxon values. Hrothgar's weeping at Beowulf's departure and Wiglaf's mourning the death of his lord--heroic-age figures unabashedly in tears--was something I hadn't consciously noted in Beowulf five or ten years ago. I tended rather to view the Anglo-Saxon emotional stance in the stereotype of the British stiff upper lip of two great world wars--through a Hemingwayesque stoical filter. A student pointed out the weeping to me a few years ago--I should have paid more attention to it myself, but I hadn't. I learn more about Beowulf and Old English literature every time I teach it in translation, and much of what I learn comes directly from my students.

Our Academy values course also featured two projects, written,

or in another medium, and it's psychologically important to call them "projects," not "papers," for as we all know, "papers" are hard to do and boring. These projects received grades of Honors, Pass, or Fail, and a failing project had to be redone until acceptable. If a student did Honors work in Project One, he was then eligible to work in painting, sculpture, montage, or some other medium for Project Two upon approval of a written proposal. For the first time one spring I found out what Beowulf looks like, a cross between John Wayne, Roosevelt Grier, and Rudolf Nureyev. One of my students spent twenty-five to thirty hours in our art studio doing his first oil painting. Another cadet worked up Grendel's grip from clawtips to shoulder sinews and baked it in ceramics. Reaching up at you out of a table, it's quite striking. Other students wrote poems, short stories, or one-act plays on Beowulfian motifs.

The last time I taught the course, six out of eight students doing non-written projects gave me Beowulf-related artifacts. Some of these young people were perhaps catering to my special interests for a grade, but I didn't care. The quality was good, and I didn't grade our creative projects anyway--our fine arts man did. You might wish to try the project approach with your students on Beowulf or other works. When you do, call on faculty members in the art or music departments to assist with planning and grading. This works very well in those high schools where

faculty members often work together anyway, and is an excellent way to proceed interdisciplinarily in the junior college, college, or university. Some of your stodgier, lazier colleagues might object to such non-written projects, but you can prove them wrong by the quality of work you receive. It's also worthwhile to display the projects somewhere, say in the library, and in high school you might wish to award simple ribbon prizes for the best three projects in various categories. A final note--make sure each student submits an explication of about 150 words with his or her project. This will satisfy the stodgy that there is indeed some writing going on in your course, but more importantly it is a worthwhile assignment. It makes the student careful in planning and executing his project, knowing he'll have to explicate it, and the explications themselves are normally interesting, well-written, and self-analytically perceptive.

It is of course the sentence, not the solaas, the ideas, attitudes, and moral outlooks in Beowulf that you'll stress in such a course, but enjoyment will still abound. In fact, the last time I taught the course thirty-five out of my thirty-eight students said they had very much enjoyed Beowulf's sheer adventure. During class one day I was theorizing about the apparent decline of the heroic in contemporary life and asked who today might be a modern Beowulf; a hand shot up and a student volunteered "Judge Sirica." A pretty thoughtful response. For

the last five years that I taught the Academy senior value course, my students consistently rated Beowulf in the top half for enjoyment of works read during the semester, and for many it was their favorite work.

More and more students, parents, and administrators are calling for values courses like this these days. If you don't have one, crank one up. We English teachers have been dealing in human values for years, and now that what we do is recognized as essential in this post-Watergate era--it's always been essential--we would be shirking our responsibility if we don't give those we serve what they need and want. It's especially pleasant when what they need and want is what we love to teach anyway. For the past thirty years or more I suspect we've been overstressing the delightful side of literature at the expense of the instructional. We can no longer remain so elitist as to ignore literature's powerful instructional value, nor feel perversely proud that what we do has a non-utilitarian value when that pride causes us to neglect students who seek wisdom from us as well as esthetic pleasure.

Now that I have become a sort of latter-day academic carpetbagger by happily assuming an English professorship at Georgia College, I'm especially excited about teaching Beowulf and other Old English works to southern young men and women, some of whom have seen the terror of an alligator-infested swamp-mere, others of whom still cross the street to avoid passing a haunted house,

and most of whom still have a sense of tradition, family, and even the Bible. If Beowulf worked midst the whirr of computers and the swoosh of wind tunnels at the Air Force Academy, it ought to thrive here. This past fall I tried something I'd always wanted to do; my first quarter at Georgia College I taught a history of the English language course, and I decided to experiment.

Out of our fifty lessons I devoted five to Beowulf in translation and five to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight at those points in the syllabus where we discussed Old and Middle English language. For Beowulf I used the E. Talbot Donaldson translation,[9] and for Gawain Marie Borroff's modern version.[10] With Beowulf I once more began by taking my students through Genesis and The Lord's Prayer, and we also analyzed and translated a number of lines of Beowulf from the original so the class could see the kind of inflected language Old English was.

As we read Beowulf in translation we saw example after example of understatement, alliteration, repetition with variation, oral-formulaic constructions, chaotic use of pronouns, unusual syntax, and a word-hoard stripped almost completely of French and Latin borrowings. The people whose language we were studying became somehow more real, and the students seemed to gain an appreciation for the language and literature they might never otherwise have attained in such a course. As a result, one student plans to study Old English and Beowulf in the original in graduate school.

At the end of the quarter several students said they would have liked even more Old and Middle English in the original, so next time I'll add some Riddles and a few Middle English lyrics which we'll examine from the point of view of language. The literature, as it should, will be reinforcing the overall course objectives.

Another area for the plan to use Beowulf in translation at Georgia College is in Adult Education. In a series of evening seminars, our main topic will be "Christ in Literature and the Arts." We'll start with a panel discussion on "The Savior-Figure in Classical Mythology" and "Christ in the Old and New Testaments" and move into "Beowulf--A Germanic-Christian Christ-Type," followed by "The Grapes of Wrath: Steinbeck's Pantheistic God," "Christ in Art," "Christ in the Asylum: One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest," "The Christ Figure in Modern Drama, St. Joan and Becket," "Brave New World: Huxley's World without Christ," "Christ in Poetry," "Christ in Music," and close with "Graham Greene's The Power and the Glory." This series involves members of the departments of Art, English, Music, Philosophy, and our Director of Theatre. Beowulf can be used in other such programs or courses whenever its major elements dovetail with other works that support a strong central topic such as "Women in Literature," "Great Myths of the Western World," "The Hero Archetype," and so on.

Now please don't think I'm suggesting that Beowulf can and should be taught everywhere in the English curriculum--though the

description of the mere is excellent creatively expository writing and a number of the speeches could well be used for oral interpretation exercises in speech classes. I'm merely suggesting that Beowulf in translation might well fit into more places than Beowulf in the original, and indeed into more places than we had thought. ust not become a hobby horse. In the small college you have to make sure that the same students don't study the same work in every course they take. But Beowulf in translation can be a splendid vehicle for a multiplicity of educational journeys.

At Georgia College I look forward to using Beowulf in our sophomore values courses and in a freshman composition course with somewhat less gifted students than I had at the Academy, and with consequently shorter writing assignments. The opportunities for teaching Beowulf and other Old English works in translation are limited only by our own imagination and circumstances. Those of us involved in graduate English education would do well to start preparing those who will be teaching Old English to work in translation as well as in the original, for the techniques are somewhat different. We might begin by seeing that every potential teacher specializing in Old English be advised or even required to take a course, seminar, or independent study in teaching Old English literature, including Beowulf, in translation. I'll be offering such an independent study to one of our English Master of Education

candidates this summer to prepare her to teach Old English in translation in high school.

If you get involved in this kind of teaching, you'll enjoy it. To prepare yourself if you feel unqualified, arrange with a local college or university to take a course such as I've described, or read a number of histories of Old English literature, anthologies of Old English in translation such as Kennedy's, the major secondary works on Beowulf,[11] pick one of several outstanding verse or prose translations of Beowulf, and begin teaching. It's as simple as that.

Notes

[1]For a sound analysis of twelve major translations and their apparatus to 1968, see John Kenny Crane, "To Thwack or Be Thwacked: An Evaluation of Available Translations and Editions of Beowulf," College English, XXXII, no. 3 (Dec. 1970), 321-40. You should also examine more recent translations such as Michael Alexander, Beowulf, a Verse Translation (Penguin, Baltimore, 1973).

[2]From Genesis I, The Creation

On anginne gesceop God heofenan and eorðan. Seo eorðe sōðlice wæs ydel and æmtig, and þeostra wæron ofer þære niwelnisse bradnisse, and Godes gast wæs geferod ofer wæteru. God cwæð þa: "Geweorðe leoht." And leoht weard geworht. God geseah þa þæt hit god wæs; and he gedælde þæt leoht fram þam þeostrum, and het þæt leoht dæg and þa þeostra niht. Þa wæs geworðan æfen and morgen an dæg.

Cognates: anginne (beginning), gesceop (shaped), heofenan (heaven), eorðan (earth), wæs (was), ydel (idle), æmtig (empty), wæron (were), ofer (over), bradnisse (broadness, expanse), Godes (God's), gast (ghost, spirit), geferod (faring, moving), wæteru (waters), cwæð (quoth, said), leoht (light), geseah (saw), þæt (that), hit (it), god (good), gedælde (doled, dealt, separated), fram (from), dæg (day) niht (night), æfen (even, evening), morgen (morning), an (one, the first).

[3]The Lord's Prayer

Fæder ure, þu þe eart on heofenum, si þin nama gehalogod. Tobecume þin rice. Gewurþe ðin willa on eordan swa swa on heofonum. Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg, and forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum. And ne gelæd þu us on costnunge, ac alys us of yfele. Soþlice.

Cognates: Fæder (father), þu (thou, you), on heofonum (in heaven), þin (thine, your), nama (name), gehalgod (hallowed, made holy), willa (will, intentions), on eordan (on earth), gedæghwamlican (daily), hlaf (loaf, bread), to dæg (today), forgyf (forgive), ure (our), gyltas (guilts, sins, crimes), gyltendum (guiltors, those who sin against us), ne (not), gelæd (lead), alys (loosen, free), yfele (evil), Soþlice (Soþ-, sooth, truth+ lice, -ly, soothly, truly=Amen).

[4]For Old English prosody see J. R. R. Tolkien, Prefatory Remarks, "On Metre," in John R. Clark Hall, Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment, ed. with Notes and Introd. by C. L. Wrenn (Allen & Unwin, London, 1950), pp. xxviii-xliii.

[5]The major Beowulf secondary works are listed in an annotated Selected Bibliography of Beowulf, a Norton Critical Edition, Joseph F. Tuso, ed., E. Talbot Donaldson, trans. (New York, 1975), pp. 189-93. The Old English Newsletter includes the best Old English bibliography each year; to receive it write Prof. Paul

Szarmach, Dept. of English, SUNY Binghamton, Binghamton, N. Y., 13901. Currently it costs you nothing to receive the OEN.